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THE DELTA WIFE

BY
WALTER McCLELLAN



D. APPLETON AND COMPANY
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TO
TO HELENA

THE DELTA WIFE

CHARACTERS

HAMER MATHES

CORA MATHES

The rising of the curtain discloses a room of HAMER MATHES' cabin, on a winter night. The house stands behind the levee in a far southern state, in the delta of the great river. The rear of the room is heaped with articles brought in for shelter against overflow: two sawhorses, a roll of chicken wire, an empty coop, a new wood door painted bright blue, wash tubs, coils of clothesline, and in front of these a pile of patch-work coverlids and white cotton sheets. MATHES, a middle-aged man, spreads a quilt over a sort of long low table, or bed, the drapery falling to the floor on all sides. It stands immediately before the heap of articles. The room is barely lighted, and when he has finished he moves quickly to a kerosene lamp on a table, and turns up the wick. He goes then to a door, R., which opens on to the porch, and shuts it, pushing into place the bars that fasten it. He is thus engaged when CORA, a young woman, enters through door, L., from the cabin's other room. She has her coat on her arm, a yarn "fascinator" is tied about her head, and she carries a small bundle which she starts to place on the quilt HAMER has spread out. On seeing her, MATHES, his back to the outer door, exclaims sharply:

Not there! Don't drop it there!

THE DELTA WIFE

CORA (*placing bundle on table*)

What'd you see outside, Hamer?

HAMER

Nothin'.

CORA

Nothin' a-tall?

HAMER

That's a fool question. You know there ain't nothin' to see but water all 'round us. This time o' night, you can't hardly see the water.

CORA

Did you hear anything?

HAMER

Water a-suckin' at the house piles; same as we've heard it all day, sence the little levee broke.

CORA

Seemed to me there was something else once; a moanin', far-off sound, like a boat's whistle.

HAMER

I don't know. But that wouldn't be the signal! *It* would be all the boats on the river to-night, all a-blowin' together. Our levee ain't goin' a break. If the levees above and below us was as strong, there wouldn't be no water 'round this shack.

CORA

How high's it climbed?

HAMER

It's most up to the floor now.

CORA

Lissen! I hear it runnin' under us.

HAMER

Well, it's run there before, and the house stood.

THE DELTA WIFE

CORA

But we had a boat them times! We ain't never been caught here like we are now. We might as well be on an island in the river. While ago I looked out the window—

HAMER

Out which window?

CORA

In yonder. Why? A pile of driftwood was floatin' right past, and I seen a white horse go by all tangled in some willow boughs. Or maybe it was a dawg.

HAMER

No, you ain't! That current's not strong enough to carry no dead body yit.

CORA

God knows what'll be floatin' there by mornin'! What was you thinkin' 'bout, Hamer, not to keep a boat here by us? We ain't got a chance in these eggshell walls if the big levee goes.

HAMER

You seem mighty anxious to live, all of a sudden. Way you've moped 'bout this place, I'd a-said you didn't ke'eh whether you stayed on top of soil or not.

CORA

S'pose I do want some more of livin'—what's strange in that? I'm not old, hard as you've tried—for you have, Hamer!—to make me old 'fore my time.

HAMER

You want some more years like them we been livin' here together? Is that the size of it?

CORA

No, no, I don't! I don't want *none* of this sorta livin' any longer.

THE DELTA WIFE

HAMER (*seizing her by the arms so that she has to face him*)

Why don't you? Why don't you? You been standin' it. You're my woman, r'member—jest as much my wife you are, after all this time, as if you was married to me.

CORA

I ain't, neither. I growed up with you hangin' 'round Paw's shanty-boat, and 'fore I was good growed up you know what you done—

HAMER

I s'pose it was all me, huh? You never had nothin' to do with it!

CORA

I ain't said that. But who'd ever told me what to do and what not to do? Nobody. Paw and you would fish and drink corn and smoke, settin' in the sunshine, talkin' dirty talk 'bout women—

HAMER

What's the use diggin' all that up now?

CORA

—And you all was pretty near the onliest folks I seen. When you fust come after me, I—I— Oh, I thought that was what bein' growed up meant, what you wanted me and you to do. Did you s'pose I loved you?

HAMER

You never acted like you hated me.

CORA

Sure, I never hated you. I never thought much 'bout you, 'cept at fust, maybe. Soon you was jest a part of things.

THE DELTA WIFE

HAMER

Well, for two years now, till the last month, you been quiet and peaceable enough, Cora. Now you got some sorta queer notion in your head—I know what I'm talkin' 'bout!—and the sooner you get it out, the better. That's straight. You're my woman.

CORA

S'pose I was to tell you—not after to-night, not much longer I'm goin' to be—what'd you say, Hamer?

HAMER

I'd say you plumb los. your senses.

CORA

But it's true. I come in here to tell you 'bout it. I've found a way out.

HAMER

Out of what?

CORA

Out of livin' with you.

HAMER

I'm damned if you have!

(Seizes her hands and pulls her to him.)

CORA

Wait, wait! I'll tell you all about it—I'll tell you ever'thing. Let go, Hamer! You ain't got no call to twist my arms thataway.

HAMER *(keeping his hold, and speaking close to her face)*

So that's why you're not hankerin' jest to be livin' on here! It's something else you're after. Did you reckon I wa'n't noticin' your carryings on? Why, I even seen them faraway looks in your eyes, and them smiles that didn't fade off till you came face to face with me. Oh, I seen everything.

THE DELTA WIFE

CORA

If you mean—mean Chris Heath loves me and I love him, it's true. I would a-told you a month ago, but I was scared—I'm always scared of you!

HAMER

Do you stand there and say you're this fellow's fancy woman?

CORA

No, I'm not. I'm not! Don't call me bad names, Hamer. I do love him, but it's not thataway. That would a-spoiled ever'thing for me.

HAMER

And for him, too, I reckon you'll say next. Was I born yesterday? Here's a good-lookin' young woman what belongs to one fellow, and she lets another 'un know she's sweet on *him*—a rovin' chap, a timber cutter, here to-day, gone to-morrow—and all he asks is to hold her hand! What do you think men are goin' up and down the world for, eyeing this woman and that?

CORA

How many men could I find willin' to wait till I say the word? But *he's* waited.

HAMER

Was he a fool, then? Or do you take me for one? You savin' yourself up thataway—it ain't natural. I know human nature, and I know you, too.

CORA

It's not true, what you think. You wanta make ever'thing fit into your notion of what's what. But it don't . . . I love him— Oh, I love him like I was a girl that no fellow's ever so much as laid his hand on. Does that sound crazy to you? There's a lot more l'm feelin' than I can tell you, or you or

anybody else would ever understand. I know there's folks a-plenty would say I'm a bad woman to have lived with you. But I ain't. You can't judge people jest by what they do. Things begun between you and me as natural most as breathin', as takin' a drink of water; and I got used to you in no time a-tall. When Paw died, I stuck to you. I always been afraid of people and things—afraid to strike out—I always feel like a high wind's blowin', and I'm tryin' to git home. . . . There wa'n't nowhere to go but with you. But you ain't never meant nothin' to me. I know that now. None of this life seems real to me. Only Chris is real, and goin' away with him.

HAMER

And you wanted to git married to this man, I s'pose—license paper, gold ring, and all?

CORA

I wanta git outa here and start over again; and I want ever'thing to be diff'runt between me and him from what it's been between you and me.

HAMER

Like hell you do! Did you know Heath 'fore he come here from the sawmill to board with us?

CORA

No, I didn't. I'd never spoke a word to him till you brought him to the house. But it's done now, and I'm jest askin' you to let ever'thing in the past be like it hadn't been a-tall. It can be, most, if you'll look at it thataway. I want to do what's fair—that's why I'm tellin' you 'bout me and Chris. And it's hard to do 'cause I'm 'fraid of you, 'fraid like a dog's 'fraid. That's what you done to me, got me where I won't call my soul my own soon. It's got so that when you come where I am, I'm a dif-

f'runt person. Soon as you walk in the door. What sorta life is that? I'd ruther be dead and done with it all!

HAMER

Oh, you ain't got the nerve to die. You hadn't got the nerve to run off with Heath 'thout tellin' me about it! Now, with all this big talk, what makes you think you're goin' to git away from here to-night?

CORA

'Cause Chris is comin' for me. In a boat.

HAMER

That's why you're tellin' me this now—beforehand, huh? Sayin' what you wanted to do, like you was boss here. Well, where did I come in? Was I to be left holdin' the bag? I ain't never yit stood for bein' cheated.

CORA

You ain't bein' cheated now.

HAMER

I am. Outa you. You belong to me.

CORA

I don't. I never promised to stick by you. Why shouldn't I go free?

(A wave strikes the outer door. It sounds like a muffled knock. CORA starts.)

HAMER

That's only a wave hittin' the door. Wants to git in. Many a man's wanderin' out there to-night, in a skiff or dugout, floatin' above land that'll be thick in cotton next fall, when he won't be nowhere. It's only the river, I say!

CORA

But Chris is comin' for me. I know he'll come.

HAMER

Well, you won't be here; and I won't be here.

CORA

Why won't we?

HAMER

'Cause we'll be *gone*.

CORA

What you mean, Hamer?

HAMER

I mean I've found a boat, and we're goin' to clear out—right now. You get that? I've found a boat to take us away. No, I ain't been drinkin'; not a drop. You jest lissen to me. 'Fore you come in here, I stepped out on the porch to see what the rain was doin'. When it got so I could tell what was what in the dark, I seen a boat, a skiff, right by our front step.

CORA

Where'd it come from?

HAMER

It was a good boat—had two seats.

CORA

Where'd it come from? Was it driftin'?

HAMER

No, it wa'n't. It was still, all right. The oars was layin' on our porch, and the skiff was tied with a rope to the post.

CORA

Hamer Mathes, who brung that boat here?

HAMER

A man, o' course. What you reckon?

CORA

That was Chris! I know it was him! (*She pauses, looking from MATHES to the outer door.*) Oh, I don't b'lieve none of this happened. I don't b'lieve there's any boat out there. I asked you what'd you see when you come from out there, and you said "Nothin'."

HAMER

I got no time now to talk jest to be talkin'. Go see for yourself.

CORA

(*She rushes to the door R., unbars it, and steps without. In a moment she reappears, and leans against the doorpost, as if exhausted.*)

It's there. It's there. (*She shuts the door, but does not bar it; then advances toward MATHES.*) What's happened? Where's Chris? O Good Lord! Where's Chris?

HAMER (*not looking at her*)

A man has a right to watch after his women folks! That's the law. No jury will swing a man for that. I seen too many cases; they all come clear. What did the fellow expect, comin' after you? I seen how things was goin' between you and him, and I made him quit stayin' here a week ago. That's why he left when he did. And now he comes sneakin' back. What'd he expect?

CORA

Don't say it! Don't say it, Hamer!

HAMER

Don't say what?

CORA

You know . . . ! That you done anything. . . .

Yes, yes, go on—tell me what's happened. I can't stand this waitin'.

HAMER (*violently*)

I done it, Cora! I done what you're thinkin' about. (*She screams.*) There ain't no use to make such a fuss. What you take me for, anyhow? I done for him same as I'd kill any low water snake creepin' in here.

CORA

You didn't—you didn't! How could you without me hearin' no noise?

HAMER

For God's sake . . . ! Do you think I'm lyin'?

CORA

Where was it, then—you done it?

HAMER

Right in this room. You was in yonder. I was in here. I heard his boat hit the porch, and I 'spicioned it was him. I knowed the door wa'n't barred, and I didn't go bar it. Why should I? If this here wa'n't to be now, it was to be sometime. I'd told him what I'd do if he come here again. And still he come. . . . I stood behind the door there, and waited. He knocked once, real light, then once more. Then he pushed on it easylike, and when he seen it wa'n't fastened, he opened it soft and come sidlin' in. Thought maybe I wa'n't here. But I was, oh, I was! And—I done it. That's when I done it. With my knife. Drove it in deep, through the fellow's shoulder blades. Yeah, it was from behind—what about that? He was bigger 'n younger 'n stronger 'n me. Jest 'fore I struck him, all in a flash I seen how he'd carry you off, and have you for his'n, and

leave me here like a rat to drown. I seen all that; I seen it all.

(The door, which CORA had failed to bar, blows open before the wind, and a stream of overflow water runs into the room. They both start, then stand as if stupefied. HAMER exclaims, irritably.)

HAMER

Why didn't you bar the door while you was about it?

CORA

(She shuts and bars it, then moves mechanically to the pile of bedding in the rear of the room, and fumbles among the rags and quilts for a cloth with which to wipe up the water. Choosing a piece of white sheet, she stoops and sops up the pools. She advances always toward the pile of heaped up articles, away from the door where she has started. HAMER watches her intently. Suddenly she halts, and holding up the rag in her two hands, speaks from the floor where she is crouched on her knees.)

What am I doin' this for? Where is he? Where's Chris? What you done with him? *(HAMER looks down, and does not answer. CORA gazes wildly from him about the room, here, there, into corners, then drops her gaze to her hands, to the rag she holds. It is splotted with bright red streaks. Then she glances at the pools about her, dabs furiously at them, sees the rag become almost solid crimson, and begins to crawl, always on her knees, through the water and blood until she is before the pile. She feels beneath the low table or bed which HAMER had draped with a quilt, then draws her hand out, looks at it, waves it in the air. It too is red. She seizes the covering and throws it off, disclosing the body of Chris Heath which lies on an old bed tick, the head on the floor, lower than the body.)* Chris, Chris! It ain't you,

Chris? Oh, God, it is him.
(*Bending over Heath, she weeps.*)

HAMER

Didn't he have to be somewhere? I told you he was dead. You come in here 'fore I was through, or you wouldn't never seen him, or known nothin' about it.

CORA

Why wouldn't I?

HAMER

'Cause he'd a-been where he's going to be 'fore we leave here.

CORA

How can you stand there—how could you talk to me all this time like nothin' had happened, and you knowin' in your heart what you done?

HAMER

I done what any man would a-done.

(*He does not look at her, but sits with his back to her and the body of Heath. CORA feels in the junk pile, and picks up a cant hook. Holding this beside her, she moves cautiously toward the man. On her face is a wild expression, as though she would burst suddenly into laughter or into tears. She is possessed with a half-crazed determination to injure MATHES. She raises the tool above his back, and as she does so utters, uncontrollably, a small scream, hardly more than a sharp breath. Then as the man springs to his feet, facing her, she drops her weapon, and sobs hysterically.*)

HAMER

If you wa'n't such a fool—how dast you try any rough stuff like that on me? You wouldn't a-done nothin', though—you ain't got the guts. You ain't nothin'.

CORA

I am, I am! I ain't dirt under your feet. I could tell you something would set your mouth crookin' another way, I could.

HAMER

What could you tell, or do, or be, or think? Good Lord, here you done had a month with this fellow, and I swear I b'lieve—I b'lieve you two ain't done nothing a-tall but set and look at each other. That's all you two done.

CORA

You're wrong—you're wrong there. Now I'll tell you something. You called me a bad name. Long ago it seems. It was true, what you said. O' course it was true, true, true, *true*. I lied so as to break it easy to you—I wanted you to let me git away. Yeah, I was his fancy woman, if you want to call it so! I got that on you and the world—they ain't nothin' can take it away from me. You can't take it away from me.

HAMER

You——! I can beat it out of your hide, though! I've made you say it, I've made you come through. If you knew what was good for you, you'd a-kept on lyin'. I could strangle you right now.

CORA

I don't ke'eh if you do.

HAMER

I won't, though. Why do you think I killed him? 'Cause I didn't want him to have you. Now he's dead, stone dead, and he can't git you away from me.

CORA

You reckon I'm still goin' on livin' with you?

HAMER

Sure, I do.

CORA

I won't! I'll run away. I'll go by myself, I tell you. I'll run to the end of the earth.

HAMER

Big talk won't git you nowheres. You ain't goin'a run.

CORA

And if we git to town, I'm goin' straight and tell the sheriff on you.

HAMER

You *are* not! Not a dam' word. Ain't nobody but you and me goin'a know what's happened in this house. . . . Now we got to be goin'. We can't lose no more time. I don't like the sound of them waves, and a big wind's blowin' outside.

CORA

Are you the same sorta folks as me and him—what sorta feelin's have you got?

HAMER

Same as you or him or anybody! I never started this business. If this fellow'd never come here, we wouldn't a-been caught in a trap like this.

CORA

Oh, I'm caught! I'm caught like a wild critter what can't move. Does ever'body in the world git caught thataway? Seems like God's a hunter—He's an old hunter, bent over, creepin' through the cane, settin' traps to catch us and tear us and hold us fast. That's what He is!

HAMER

I reckon it's us that sets 'em. It's us that stumbles on 'em. And it's up to us to git out of 'em.

CORA

There ought to be some way to git out. . . . Oh, I don't know nothin'—I don't know nothin' a-tall. But it ain't fair, it ain't fair.

HAMER

The way out for us is to leave here in his boat, and forgit all we done and seen to-night. The boat's outside, and our best chance is to git to high ground 'fore the levee goes, if it does go. Put on your hat and coat. (*She obeys. He goes to door R., and opens it.*) Now I got one thing to do 'fore we leave. If the levee goes, *he'll* go, too, but if the levee holds, the house'll stand, and here his body'll be. I ain't takin' no chances. It's the river road for him. (*He stoops over Heath's body.*) Full of himself he was when he come, thinkin' of the big lumber camps, and the big towns, and the lights, and pay days, and what him and you would do in the world. And now he's out of the world, all of him that matters, forever and a day.

CORA (*to herself*)

He's out of the world. Out of the world.

HAMER

(*He puts his hands under Heath's armpits and drags the body slowly across the floor. The quilt falls from Heath, and lies in their wake. CORA does not move, but stands with her eyes fastened on HAMER and his burden until they pass through the door. When they disappear, it becomes an open black space filled with the roar of wind and water. A boat whistle sounds. Another, and another, and many others,*

lonely, clamorous, a chorus of desolation. The big levee has broken, spreading destruction far and wide through the Delta country. Then CORA moves; suddenly, swiftly. She runs to the door, slams it, pushes the heavy hickory bars in place, and throws her weight against them.)

CORA

I'll show you! I'll show you I can do something. I ain't no dirt under your feet.

(HAMER is heard beating on the boards, and, indistinctly, calling "Cora! Cora!")

CORA

No, no! Go on! You can't git me now. Not this way, you can't. Never any more. (*He does not call again. She turns, stoops and gathers up the quilt that had fallen from Heath, fingering its edges.*)

Yeah, a high wind's a-blowin'—it's always been a-blowin'. But this time it's shakin' all the trees and the rivers in the world, and the houses are shakin'. (*She drops the quilt, spreads out her arms, her back still to the door.*) I'm not afraid. I'm not afraid. I'm not afraid!

(*Her head moves from side to side, and a slight smile plays about her mouth—almost a sweet smile. In the clamor of noise her voice is lost altogether, and though her lips continue to move, not so much as a faint cry is heard in the heavy tumult of the night.*)

(1)

CURTAIN

Handwritten text, possibly a signature or initials, located in the bottom right corner of the page.

